

HOW TO DECODE EXAM QUESTIONS

BY ANA SMITH

Why Question Decoding is Your Secret Weapon



Exams aren't just about what you know—they're about how well you understand the question and its format. You could write a full page of facts, but if you miss what the question is really asking, none of it will earn points.

That's where decoding comes in. When you learn to break down the language of exam questions, you unlock exactly what your teacher or test wants from you. Whether you're writing an essay, answering a short-response, or solving a math word problem, or a multiple choice question, being able to decode the prompt helps you give sharper, more targeted answers that actually earn credit.

In this guide, we will dive into the best decoding strategies to help you on your next standardized test, AP test, language test, or in-class test. We will also look over other helpful tips to help you in any academic setting, as well as real world with problem solving and decoding.

Key Words + Commands



Here are some key words, commands, and other vocabulary you may see on tests or assignments– and what do to with them.

Command Word	What It Means- Simply Put	What To Do
Analyze	To break something into parts to understand its nature, function, or relationship to other things.	Look for patterns, causes & effects, relationships, symbolism, and other literary devices. Use evidence.
Discuss	Explore an idea from multiple sides.	Present arguments or viewpoints with reasoning. Often includes a conclusion.
Evaluate	Judge the value or significance of something.	Weigh pros and cons, give evidence, and justify your judgment.
Compare	Show how things are similar and different.	Use specific examples to highlight similarities AND differences.
Describe	Give details about what something is or looks like.	Use sensory or factual information clearly.
Explain	Make clear how or why something happens.	Give reasons, steps, or causes using logical flow.
Justify	Support an idea or decision.	Use reasoning and evidence to back up your answer.
Summarize	Give the main points.	Keep it brief and focused on the big picture.

Sample Questions & Breakdowns

Example	Sample Question	Breakdown
AP: English Example (AP Lit)	<p>In the poem, the speaker reflects on the passage of time. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the poet uses literary elements and techniques to convey the speaker's complex attitude toward time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Command word = Analyze <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Break down how literary choices create meaning. ● Focus is on the Speaker's attitude toward time ● Literary tools to look for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Imagery, tone, diction, figurative language, structure, etc. ● <u>Response Goal:</u> Don't summarize. Instead, explain how the poet's techniques create the speaker's emotional complexity (e.g., nostalgia, anxiety, acceptance).
AP: History Example (APUSH)	<p>Evaluate the extent to which the market revolution marked a turning point in the development of the United States from 1800 to 1850.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Command word = Evaluate the extent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Make a judgment about how significant the change was. ● Focus is on the Market Revolution and whether it was a historical turning point ● Time Period: 1800–1850 ● <u>Response Goal:</u> Consider what changed (e.g., transportation, labor, industry) vs. what stayed the same. Argue whether the Market Revolution truly transformed the U.S.
SAT: Reading Example	<p>In context, what is the main purpose of the sentence “ _____ ” (lines 27–28)?</p> <p>A) _____</p> <p>B) _____</p> <p>C) _____</p> <p>D) _____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Command word is Purpose <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Why did the author include this sentence? ● Focus is on understanding rhetorical function in context <p>What to Do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read a few lines before and after the quoted sentence. ● Identify whether the sentence adds, challenges, clarifies, or transitions. ● Eliminate distractors that don't align with the flow of logic.

Understanding Test Format + Other Notes ↗

Again, *exams aren't just about what you know—they're about how well you understand the question and its format.* There are many testing strategies that can be used to help one score higher. Here are some of my favorite tips and strategies to help you on your next test:

1. Know the timing: Running out of time on a test is one of the worst testing feelings in my opinion. Know and understand how much time you have per section or question. When studying, practice with a timer to build pacing.

2. Understand the question types: Identify the categories of questions, such as multiple choice, free response, etc. and practice.

3. Mark & Skip Strategy: Flag tough questions, move on, and come back. This works especially well on timed tests. Do not waste time staring at a question you do not understand. Plus, the answer or an idea for how to answer may come later in the test. *a positive, confident mindset.* Get into the test and treat each question like a puzzle you get to solve. Be the main character and walk into testing day like it's your moment (because it is and you prepared for this moment). **Finally, remember your why. Every effort counts.**

Now, understanding test format, as I mentioned, is incredibly important for all tests. **However, this idea is the most important when looking at standardized tests or AP/IB exams.** I want to share some test-specific format notes that have helped me when studying and taking these tests:

1. AP Exams:

- Each subject has a unique format. It usually revolves around multiple choice and free response. These exams are scored from a scale 1-5. Colleges usually award credit for a 4 or 5, (3 is passing). It is important to look into the colleges that you are applying to and what score they give credit with. These tests are times and time management is essential. Practice with timers.

2. IB Exams:

- While I have never taken one of these tests, I have looked into criteria and test format for these exams. Time management, practice, and studying is just as important. The format varies by subject but generally includes multiple papers, essays, oral presentations, practical work, and internal assessments. Global perspective and critical thinking skills are highly emphasized

3. Digital SAT:

- This test is divided into a Reading/Writing Section and a Math Section. This test is adaptive, meaning one may receive harder or easier questions based on their performance. There is no guessing penalty, so leave no question blank. Reading/Writing focuses on grammar, argument structure, and word-in-context. Math includes linear equations, systems, geometry, and real-world applications. You can use a calculator on math sections. DESMOS, an online graphing calculator, is included in the test on the appropriate math section. The test is scored out of 1600 (800 for each section).

4. ACT

- There are 4 multiple-choice sections (English, Math, Reading, and Science) and an optional Writing section. The test is scored out of 36. The test is relatively fast-paced, meaning time management is incredibly important. There is no guessing penalty. The science section is more directed towards data interpretation, not heavy with content knowledge.

Remember, these tests do not define you. You can, however, shape your experience and even your score with the right attitude. *One of the most underrated strategies, in my opinion, is showing up with a positive, confident mindset.* Get into the test and treat each question like a puzzle you get to solve. Be the main character and walk into testing day like it's your moment (because it is and you prepared for this moment). **Finally, remember your why. Every effort counts.**

Believe in your preparation, give it your best shot, don't overthink every question, and walk out proud of how you showed up. You've got this!

